

**DEFINING A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE IN THE ISLAMIC CONTEXT:
THE CONCEPT OF GRATITUDE IN ELIAS OF NISIBIS' *KITĀB
DAF' AL-HAMM***

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Abstract

The eleventh-century “Nestorian” cleric Elias of Nisibis’ (d. 1046) *Kitāb daf' al-hamm* (*The Book of Elimination of Grief*) provides a strategy for readers to deal with unwanted sorrow and help them to attain moral perfection. This article focuses on an unstudied part of *Daf' al-hamm*, the virtue of gratitude, which constitutes the second chapter of the book. Analyzing the content, structure, and language, this article intends to determine how gratitude is defined and promoted in the text and the ways in which the author engaged with the surrounding Islamic culture. Throughout the chapter, Elias employs traditional Islamic material, from Sufi sources to ḥadīth quotations, to encourage his Christian audience to attain gratitude. This implies a high level of integration of the author and his Christian readers in the surrounding Islamic culture.

Key Words: Christian ethics, gratitude, Elias of Nisibis, *Daf' al-hamm*.

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Introduction

Within a century following the Prophet Muḥammad's death, the land that had been brought under the control of the Islamic Empire was so large that the borders of the caliphate extended from modern-day Afghanistan and India in the east to the southern border of modern France in the west. This rather dramatic shift in the socio-political situation marked a turning point in the history of Christians living in the conquered regions. Intellectually, this was a new era in which the barriers were lifted between the east and the west of Mesopotamia, and representatives of various scientific traditions and experts in their specific fields found an avenue for cultural cooperation. The opportunities for learning a multitude of disciplines and close contact with the believers of different religions and members of other cultures created a vibrant intellectual environment from which all the subjects of the empire benefited extensively.¹

Adopting Arabic, the *lingua-franca* of the Islamic empire, as their literary language was one of the earliest reactions of Christians to this new socio-political and intellectual reality. From the eighth century, Christians started producing Arabic treatises to defend and explain

¹ For the history of Islamic conquests and their socio-political impacts, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31-56. For the treatment of non-Muslim minorities under Islam, see Milka Levy-Rubin, "Al-Shurūṭ al-'umariyya," in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, ed. David Thomas. Brill Online, 2013. http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/christian-muslim-relations/al-shurut-al-umariyya-COM_23497 Accessed April 30, 2018; Yohanan Friedmann, "Dhimma," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Gudrun Krämer, et al., eds. Brill Online, 2013. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/dhimma-COM_26005, accessed April 30, 2018. For examples of cultural exchange, see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsī Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998); David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein, eds., *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

their faith.² Today, Christian Arabic literature covers a wide range of genres, from Bible commentaries to philosophical treatises, many of which were preserved in manuscripts waiting to be edited and studied.³ Living in an environment dominated by Islam resulted in various levels of enculturation that can easily be recognized in the language, content, and structure of the writings of Christian authors.⁴

This article studies how the virtue of gratitude (*shukr*) is explained in the eleventh-century clergyman Elias of Nisibis' ethical work entitled *Kitāb dafʿ al-hamm* (*The Book of Elimination of Grief*). To date, *Dafʿ al-hamm* has been the subject of few studies that usually examine the whole book as an ethical treatise rather than analyzing its content in detail.⁵ This article focuses on the second division of the book, entitled "On the Benefit of Gratitude and Damage of Ingratitude" (*Fī manfaʿat al-shukr wa-maḍarrat al-kufr*). By examining the content and the language of the text and contextualizing it in its socio-political and intellectual environment, the present article intends to assess the ways in which "gratitude" is defined and promoted to a primarily Christian audience in *Dafʿ al-hamm* and how the content and the language of the text were influenced by the surrounding Islamic culture.

² Samir Khalil Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 56-114.

³ According to Noble and Treiger, almost ninety percent of Christian Arabic literature is still in manuscripts. For more, see Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger, eds., *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World 700-1700: An Anthology of Sources* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 3-6.

⁴ For a few examples of the Islamic influence on Christian Arabic sources, see Sidney Griffith, "Islam and the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*: Rabīʿ I, 264 AH," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990), 225-264.; Griffith, "The Muslim Philosopher al-Kindi and His Christian Readers: Three Arab Christian Texts on 'The Dissipation of Sorrows'," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996), 111.

⁵ Two available editions of the whole work are Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb dafʿ al-hamm*, ed. Qusṭanṭīn al-Bāshā (Miṣr: Maṭbaʿat al-Maʿārif, 1900); Elias of Nisibis, *Il Libro per Scacciare la Preoccupazione (Kitāb dafʿ al-hamm)*, ed. and trans. Anna Pagnini and Samir Khalil Samir (Torino: Silvio Zamorani, 2007-2008). Griffith studies *Dafʿ al-hamm* along with two Christian Arabic works on the elimination of grief in his article "The Muslim Philosopher al-Kindi and his Christian Readers: Three Arab Christian Texts on 'The Dissipation of Sorrows'."

I. Elias of Nisibis, His Life and Career

Elias was born in the year 975 in the town called Shīnā. He was ordained as a priest of the Church of the East at the age of nineteen. Between the years 994 and 1008, he served at the monasteries of St. Simeon and St. Michael. In 1002, he was ordained as the Bishop of Bet Nūhadrā. Following the death of Metropolitan Yahbalāhā at the end of 1008, he was consecrated as Metropolitan Bishop of Nisibis on 26 December 1008. He served in this position until he died on 18 July 1046.⁶

Elias was one of the most productive intellectual figures of his era. He wrote numerous works covering the areas of Christian theology, history, and ethics. He was actively involved in the Christian-Muslim polemics of his own time. His renowned theological compendium *Kitāb al-majālis* provides a written record of his conversations with the contemporary Muslim vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Maghribī (981-1027). Reportedly, these sessions were held in Nisibis⁷ within the span of a year between July 1026 and June 1027. The work is organized into seven sections, throughout which Elias provides answers to al-Maghribī’s questions regarding various aspects of Christian beliefs and practices.⁸

Two of Elias’ works extensively address ethical issues. In addition to *Daf‘ al-hamm*, he wrote a letter on celibacy entitled “Letter on the Superiority of Chastity” (*Risālah fī faḍīlat al-‘afāf*) to defend the Christian ascetic practice of abstinence against the criticism of the ninth-century Muslim author al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868). He organizes the letter in four main sections, explaining the necessity and benefits of celibacy over marriage and refuting al-Jāḥiẓ.⁹ *Daf‘ al-hamm* is composed in the

⁶ On Elias and his works, see Jean Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Synodicon Orientale: Recueil de Synods Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 683; Georg Graf, *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabischen Literatur* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947) II, 177-189. Samir Khalil Samir, “Un Auteur Chrétien de Langue Arabe, Elie de Nisibe” *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977), 257-284.

⁷ Modern-day Nusaybin in southeast Turkey.

⁸ For the list of editions and the translations of *Kitāb al-majālis*, see Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala, “Kitāb al-majālis,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600-1500*, ed. David Thomas. Brill Online, 2010. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-8054_cmri_COM_23351, accessed May 16, 2018.

⁹ Sidney Griffith, “The Virtue of Continence (*al-‘iffāb*) and the “Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*): An Islamochristian Inquiry in Abbasid Religious and

form of a booklet consisting of twelve chapters dealing with certain virtues specified in the titles of each chapter. It was written by the request of the same vizier, Abū l-Qāsim al-Maghribī, with whom Elias had discussions that are reported in *Kitāb al-majālis*. The purpose of the work is to provide a solution for human grief.

II. *Dafʿ al-hamm* as an Ethical Work

The late tenth – early eleventh century, in which Elias of Nisibis lived and produced his *Dafʿ al-hamm*, witnessed one of the most important periods in the history and development of ethical theories in Arabo-Islamic thought. Moral literature in the Arabic tradition covers a wide range of issues, from the code conduct for individual members of the community to the administration of the entire society. It was initially based on the traditional teachings of the Qurʾān and ḥadīth literature and showed a gradual development with the subsequent introductions of Persian moral thought and Greek philosophical material. It reached its established form by the eleventh century.¹⁰

A brief look at the corpus of ethical literature during the time of Elias of Nisibis would be very helpful to set his work in context. Various significant intellectual figures of his era produced works touching upon moral questions in numerous ways. The influential Muʿtazilī theologian ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025),¹¹ Shāfiʿī scholar and jurist Abū l-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 1058), who is the author of *Adab al-dunyā wa-l-dīn*,¹² the famous polymath Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), the author of the moral treatise *Tabdhīb al-akhlāq*,¹³ and the “Jacobite” Yaḥyā ibn

Philosophical Circles,” in *Gotteserlebnis und Gotteslehre: Christliche und Islamische Mystik im Orient*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2010), 25-47.

¹⁰ Richard Walzer and Hamilton A. R. Gibb, “*Akhlāq*,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Brill Online, 2012. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0035, accessed May 24, 2018.

¹¹ For discussions on meta-ethical questions, see, for example, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadānī, *Sbarḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsab*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUthmān (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2001).

¹² Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *Adab al-dunyā wa-l-dīn*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-ʿUlūm, 1988).

¹³ Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb Ibn Miskawayh, *Kitāb tabdhīb al-akhlāq wa-taṭbīr al-aʿrāq*, ed. Ḥasan Tamīm (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāh, 1961).

‘Adī (d. 974), who composed his *Tabdhīb al-akblāq*¹⁴ in the late tenth century, are just a few to mention here.

Moral writings were produced in a wide range of genres in the Arabic tradition, and it is often quite difficult to find a suitable way to categorize them. Perhaps George Hourani’s attempt should be addressed here as a useful classification that efficiently reflects the complexity of this broad area. Hourani proposes a fourfold scheme to sort different types of ethical works considering the authors’ methods and sources. In this system, the first two categories are entitled “Normative religious ethics” and “Normative secular ethics.” These cover the moral teachings originating from spiritual texts in the Islamic tradition such as the Qur’ān and ḥadīth literature and the types of writings that offer guidance and advice to rulers, such as “Mirrors for Princes.” The latter two categories comprise the ethical literature dealing with meta-ethical questions and have a more analytical approach. The third category is “Ethical Analysis in the Religious Tradition,” which covers the works of theologians who touched upon questions regarding human free will and predestination. The last category is entitled “Ethical Analysis by Secular Philosophers” and covers the works of philosophers who extensively employed Greek philosophy in their moral writings.¹⁵ Hourani’s fourfold scheme, although solely focused on ethical writings produced by Muslims, is helpful to place Elias’ ethical approach in context. Christian intellectuals of the time, and Elias in particular, were very much aware of the flourishing moral literature in Arabo-Islamic thought, who felt the necessity to produce moral treatises for their fellow religionists in Arabic.¹⁶

Even a cursory look at the content of Elias’ *Daf‘ al-hamm* provides clear witness of his engagement with the ethical writings of Muslim authors. In the introduction of his work, he admits that he benefitted

¹⁴ The latest edition and English translation is provided by Sidney Griffith; see Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī, *The Reformation of Morals / Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī: A Parallel English-Arabic Text Translated and Introduced by Sidney H. Griffith*, ed. and trans. Sidney Griffith (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-22.

¹⁶ In his “The Muslim Philosopher al-Kindi and His Christian Readers: Three Arab Christian Texts on Dissipation on the Dissipation of Sorrows,” Griffith points to several parallels between Elias’ work and al-Kindī’s treatise.

from the Muslim luminary Abū Ya‘qūb Ishāq al-Kindī’s (d. 873) ethical treatise *Risālah fī l-ḥīlah li-daf‘ al-aḥzān* (Treatise on the Art of Dispelling Sorrows). Indeed, the title of Elias’ work clearly indicates his inspiration from al-Kindī’s renowned work on morality.¹⁷

Al-Kindī follows a rational approach using philosophical sources. On the other hand, in *Daf‘ al-hamm*, Elias is careful to keep a balance between the piety and the use of the intellect to eliminate unwanted sorrow. He proposes a stratagem that contains both religious and rational elements to achieve ideal moral status.

In the introduction of his work, he likens the sorrow of the soul to the diseases of the body and states that eliminating grief from the soul is more important than recovering the body from illness because the soul is higher than the body. He divides grief into two distinct categories: ordinary (*al-‘ammah*) and special (*al-kbāṣṣah*). Accordingly, ordinary grief is caused by an external factor and affects everyone in the same way, such as death or the loss of wealth. Special grief is specific to individuals because it is caused by these people’s own lack of precaution and afflicts everyone on different levels. For this type of grief, Elias gives the example of a loquacious man who talks about a matter that does not concern him. As a result, he loses his life or fortune. Thus, while the special type of grief is easy to avoid beforehand when necessary precautions are taken, the first kind of grief is impossible to prevent because it comes from God (*al-āfāt al-samāwiyyah*) as “heavenly misfortunes.” However, it is more difficult to ameliorate the situation when the special type of grief occurs.¹⁸

According to Elias, the best way to escape from ordinary grief is to follow and improve religious virtues and avoid evil-doing. On the other hand, recovery from the special type of grief can be possible by following the mind. Here, he recounts twelve virtues with corresponding vices in two categories, reflecting his classification of the two types of sorrows that structure the rest of his work. He devotes

¹⁷ Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ al-Kindī, *Risālah fī l-ḥīlah li-daf‘ al-aḥzān*, in *Rasā’il falsafīyyah li-l-Kindī wa-l-Fārābī wa-Ibn Bājjah wa-Ibn ‘Adī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983); al-Kindī, *Studi su al-Kindī II: Uno Scritto Morale Inedito di al-Kindī [Risālat Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī fī l-ḥīlah li-daf‘ al-aḥzān]*, ed. and trans. Hellmut Ritter and Richard R. Walzer (Roma: Dott. Giovanni Bardi, 1938).

¹⁸ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb daf‘ al-hamm*, 6.

a chapter to each virtue and its corresponding blameworthy act mentioned in this introductory part.

The balance between piety and rational thinking clearly appears in his division of virtues. He calls the first six virtues “religious virtues” and states that they help to prevent heavenly misfortunes. The second category is called “rational virtues;” these assist one in avoiding harmful acts that will put him in worldly trouble. Perhaps another subtle detail regarding the divisions of *Daf^c al-bamm* is that while the emphasis on the first six virtues is improving the reader’s piety, the virtues from seven to twelve focus on developing an individual’s relationship with society.¹⁹ Similarly, as will be seen in the analysis of the chapter on gratitude, the author is careful to recount both mundane and otherworldly benefits of the relevant virtues in each division. A brief look at the content of *Daf^c al-bamm* could provide good insight into Elias’ mentality on the organization of this work:

1. On the Excellence of Piety and Lowness of Disobedience
2. On the Benefit of Gratitude and Damage of Ingratitude
3. On the Merit of Chastity and Harm of Wickedness
4. On the Superiority of Humility and Inferiority of Arrogance
5. On the Beauty of Mercy and Atrocity of Austerity
6. On the Benefit of Repentance and Harm of Persistence
7. On the Excellence of Following the Mind and Lowness of Following the Desire
8. On the Benefit of Consultation and Harm of Tyranny
9. On Praising Good Character and Blaming Bad Character
10. On the Honor of Generosity and Lowness of Meanness
11. On the Beauty of Justice and Evil of Persecution
12. On the Benefit of Forbearance and Damage of Abomination.

In each division, the benefits of a virtue are explained along with the damages that can be caused by following its opposite blameworthy action. Elias states that each chapter contains three basic elements: a description of the virtue that is specified in the title, stories, and tales

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

that encourage readers to strive and attain the particular virtue and strategies of wise and clever people that will help the reader on his journey to acquire the specified praiseworthy acts and behaviors. Although he makes use of the teachings of some philosophers, his approach cannot be classified as “philosophical” because he also uses citations from religious personalities and the Bible. These quotations appear one after another in the text, often preceded by vague expressions such as “it was said” or “they say” (or, more specifically, “some wise men said” or “some scholars said”). This style makes it almost impossible to trace the sources of most of these citations. Elias clarifies his sources at the beginning of his work as follows:

With the will and the help of God, I wrote a chapter for each praiseworthy [virtue] and its opposite blameworthy behaviors in which I recount the words of the ancients, writings of sages, and counsels of scholars which motivates [the reader] to acquire the certain virtue or avoid its opposite vice.²⁰

Throughout the text, the ideas and supporting quotations are juxtaposed without any commentary. Thus, the text has a didactic character and should fall under Hourani’s “normative religious ethics” category. The twofold mundane and eschatological interests can be observed in various ways throughout the text. In this way, it looks like an example of the *adab* literature.²¹

III. Gratitude in *Dafʿ al-hamm*

The second division of the book, in which Elias explains the merits of gratitude, constitutes a relatively short portion of the entire work, with only eight pages in al-Bāshā’s edition.²² The Arabic title of the chapter is “Fī manfaʿat al-shukr wa-maḍarrat al-kufr,” “On the Benefit of Gratitude (*shukr*) and Damage of Ingratitude (*kufr*).” It is organized according to Elias’ proposed scheme, which is specified in the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ For a good overview of *adab* literature, see Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Adab Literature: 9th to 13th Century,” in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1872-5309_ewic_EWICSIM_0031, accessed September 13, 2018. For examples of *adab* literature on morality, see Francesco Chiabotti, et al., eds., *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi Adab* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

²² This article is based on al-Bāshā’s edition in 1900. The whole work is 98 pages with the one-page introduction of the editor.

introduction of the work. Accordingly, the chapter starts with the description of *shukr*, followed by the sayings of wise men on the benefits of gratitude and examples from their lives:

It is (*shukr*) praising the benefactor for what He grants, mentioning His favor and remembering His kindness. The fruits of this attitude are the increase of benefaction from God and receiving affection from humankind. Seeing the increase in Godly blessings and love of the other people would boost one's happiness and minimize his grief. The opposite of the gratitude is ingratitude (*kufî*), which is denial of the gifts of the giver, avoiding mentioning His blessings, and not remembering His grace. The result of this behavior is the loss of the benefactions of God and being condemned by people. Experiencing the decrease in the Godly blessings and receiving reprimand from the people would increase one's sorrow and diminish his happiness.²³

Here, the clear connection between gratitude and the dispelling of grief that constitutes the main purpose of Elias' work is explicit. Perhaps a striking detail regarding its mundane and otherworldly outcomes should be noted here. According to the text, one who is grateful to God receives both His grace and the sympathy of people, which makes life harmonious and pleasant. This twofold worldly and eschatological concern appears in various ways throughout the text. Although the focus in this chapter is showing gratitude towards the creator, there are several occasions where societal concern appears. Elias says: "The one who receives blessing from God should bless people [through it]; this [attitude] itself is thankfulness and protection from misfortune."²⁴

The idea of sharing the benefaction with society parallels the writings of Elias' contemporary, the Shāfi'ī jurist and scholar al-Māwardī, who was the author of the renowned *Adab al-dunyā wa-l-dīn*. According to him, one who receives any kind of favor becomes indebted to the benefactor and should respond with gratefulness and share some of it with others. This is the perfect way of showing the gratitude, which will result in an increase and continuation of the

²³ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb daf' al-hamm*, 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

blessing.²⁵

On the societal level, thankfulness to human beings is also recommended in the text. An interesting citation of a prophetic saying appears when Elias emphasizes the importance of showing gratitude to other people:

It is said that the one who does not thank people will not be grateful to God. It is [also] said that the one who does not thank God will not be grateful to humankind. The one who is not grateful for little will not be grateful for abundance.²⁶

This expression is a combined version of different ḥadīths on gratitude that are mentioned by three authors. The first sentence is the verbatim quotation of a ḥadīth narrated by Abū Hurayrah in Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan*.²⁷ The following statement is mentioned by al-Tirmidhī in the division of righteousness (al-Birr) in his *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*.²⁸ The final portion was reported by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal in two different versions.²⁹ Elias seems to amalgamate all these expressions. Perhaps a question to ask here is whether Elias was aware that these words are the advice of the prophet of a rival religion because he hardly ever mentions the source of his quotations in the text. Given that he maintained close contact with Muslims as a Christian intellectual of the time, it is almost certain that he obtained these sayings from a Muslim source and that he is comfortable using them to encourage his Christian audience to attain the virtue of gratitude. Indeed, Elias' use of Islamic material can also be easily observed in his work *Kitāb al-majālis*. For example, in the sixth division of this book, where Elias discusses the various aspects of Syriac and Arabic languages, he often gives examples from Islamic tradition, which shows that he has good command of both languages and religious

²⁵ Al-Māwardī, *Adab*, 303. Although they lived apart within the same time frame, given the reputation of Māwardī in court circles and his mobility, it is quite likely that some of his works reached Elias.

²⁶ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb daḥ al-hamm*, 29.

²⁷ Abū Dāwūd, "al-Adab," 11. The Arabic version of the ḥadīth appears as: "Lā yashkur Allāh man lā yashkur al-nās."

²⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, "al-Birr," 35. Al-Tirmidhī gives two versions of the same ḥadīth narrated by Abū Hurayrah and Abū Sa'īd (ḥadīth no. 1954-1955).

²⁹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir and Ḥamzah Aḥmad al-Zayn (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995), XIV, 176. Two different versions are narrated by the same narrator, al-Nu'mān ibn Bashīr (ḥadīth no. 18361-18362).

traditions.³⁰ Therefore, it is very likely that he was aware of the Islamic origins of those sayings and used them consciously.

According to Elias, being grateful has a direct impact on improving the individual's mundane and otherworldly affairs:

Some of the wise men said the grateful, generous, and humble person is loved [by others], ungrateful (*kāfir*), arrogant, and the mean one is abhorred [by people]. Again, they said there is no beloved person who is either grateful, generous or humble, and there is no hated one who is either ungrateful, mean or arrogant [towards others]. Whoever includes gratefulness, generosity, and humility in their character becomes beloved by God and by people for those three qualities, and whoever includes thanklessness, parsimony, and vanity in themselves, they are detested by God and by people for [having] those three attitudes.³¹

The aforementioned twofold mundane and otherworldly concern clearly appears here. What is most striking in the Arabic version of these words is the antinomy between the concepts of *shukr* and *kufr*. In Arabic, the word *kufr*, which can be translated as both “ingratitude” and “disbelief,” is usually employed as the opposite of *shukr*. Ibn Manẓūr describes *shukr* as “acknowledgement of beneficence and its promulgation.” He defines the antonym of thankfulness (*shukrān*) with the Arabic word *kufṛān*, which has the connotation of “rejection,” whether of the existence of God or the favor that is granted by Him.³² What makes this passage particularly interesting is Elias' use of other terms along with the concepts of *shukr* and *kufr*. There is a clear semantic connection between the concepts of gratefulness, humility, and generosity and vanity, stinginess, and ingratitude (*kufṛ*) in this passage. This gloss has strong parallels with the Qur'ānic discourse on the concepts of *shukr* and *kufṛ*. In several verses in the Qur'ān,

³⁰ For instance, Elias impressively gives examples of the different readings of certain Qur'ānic verses during the discussion, citing those verses accurately. For a detailed analysis of the sixth chapter of *al-Majālis*, see David Bertaina, “Science, Syntax, and Superiority in Eleventh-Century Christian-Muslim Discussion: Elias of Nisibis on the Arabic and Syriac languages,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22, no. 2 (2011), 197-207.

³¹ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb daf' al-bamm*, 30-31.

³² Abū l-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Būlāq: al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1883), V, 91-93.

thankfulness is mentioned as the opposite of disbelief.³³ Moreover, in the context of Islamic scripture, *kufṛ* is strongly connected to arrogance, and on several occasions, arrogance is mentioned as the opposite of faith or submission to God.³⁴ Thus, the author's choice of concepts related to thankfulness and ingratitude seems to be influenced by the Qur'ānic gloss of those terms.³⁵

According to the text, the most immediate and obvious benefit of gratitude in this world is the increase in blessing (*ni'mah*), such as wealth, success or health. Throughout the text, gratitude is strongly connected to an increase in blessing. Elias mentions this positive correlation on several occasions as the benefit of gratefulness. He says:

Some of the scholars advised their sons, "Oh my son, I suggest you to pray because it is followed by a response [from God] and, to be grateful because an increase comes with it."³⁶

It is said that there is no extinction of blessing if it is being praised, and there is no continuousness to it when it is being denied. Thankfulness is the endurance of blessing and protection from trouble.³⁷

In fact, the root *sh-k-r* and some of its derivatives carry the connotation of "enhancement" in the Arabic language. Ibn Manẓūr explains the connection between the increase and the root *sh-k-r*, giving the example of "rain." Accordingly, the expression *ishtakarāt al-samā'* is used in Arabic to describe the weather when it rains heavily. Similarly, dairy animals that produce large amounts of milk are described with the adjective from the same root as *ibil^{um} shakārā* or *ghanam^{um} shakārā*, "camel or sheep that produce abundant of milk."³⁸ The connection between showing gratitude and receiving heavenly blessings clearly appears in Q 14:7: "(...) If you are grateful, I will certainly increase (*azīdannakum*); but if you deny (*kafartum*), indeed My punishment is severe." It is not surprising that Elias uses the same

³³ Q 14:7; 16:112-114; 27:40; 39:7.

³⁴ Q 2:13-34; 4:172-173; 7:75-76, 146-206; 16:22-49; 37:35; 45:31.

³⁵ For a detailed study of ethical terms in the Qur'ān, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal & Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

³⁶ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb daf' al-hamm*, 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸ Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, V, 94.

verb as the Qurʾān, the verb *zāda*, to express “increase” on several occasions.³⁹ Once again, the influence of the surrounding Qurʾānic culture is evident here.

Being grateful is not a difficult task because even having no difficulty in daily life is enough to be grateful, according to the text. Elias advises his reader to be content in this world to be happy:

Know this, every day in which you have not experienced any change in your religion, mind, body, and situation, you have not said anything which put you in trouble, you have not done anything which harms you and you have not heard anything which saddens you is the most blissful day.⁴⁰

Life may not go smoothly all the time, and in case of misfortunes, the believer is advised to be patient. There is a strong connection among “gratitude,” “patience,” and “happiness” in the text. Elias states that every person in this world is surrounded by people living in either a better or worse situation. Looking at the people who are in poorer conditions not only improves the quality of their life but also eliminates grief and increases their gratitude. Seeing the blessings in their life and feeling grateful for what they possess would consequently increase their patience.⁴¹ Here, Elias quotes from some of the monks advising their students: “You are richer than the rulers.” When the students ask how this is possible when they have nothing and the rulers own large amounts of property, the monk says, “You are grateful although you have nothing with you, but the rulers are not thankful even if they possess abundance of wealth.”⁴² It is advised to be patient, especially in times of illness and disabilities, such as blindness and leprosy. Being patient and grateful in such situations would help in healing from the sickness and receiving blessings from God in the afterlife.⁴³

Elias is careful to provide a comprehensive picture regarding the necessity and benefits of thankfulness for readers. Towards the end of the chapter, he explains how the virtue of gratitude should be practiced:

³⁹ Elias of Nisibis, *Kitāb dafʿ al-bamm*, 25-27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Gratefulness is expressed in three ways: acknowledgement of the heart, praise of the tongue and recognition through action, which is the highest level of gratitude.⁴⁴

This particular interpretation seems to be borrowed from a Sufi source because the perception of thankfulness in three levels is an essential part of the Sufi understanding of the same virtue in Islamic tradition. In Sufi thought, gratitude should be practiced in three levels, including the acknowledgement of the heart, expression of the tongue, and acts of the body. The first step in this tripartite scheme consists of accepting the divine origins of the blessing, which leads one to direct gratitude towards God rather than anyone else. The gratitude of the tongue, as might be expected, is the wording of thankfulness towards God through praise and prayer. Gratitude of the body is the final stage, which is simply the reaction of the individual's limbs to the inner awareness of the heart and verbal acknowledgement of the blessings of the divine Benefactor.⁴⁵ Elias seems to know the Sufi understanding of gratitude very well; he borrows this threefold scheme as a whole without excluding any of the steps. Likewise, he appears to be completely at ease employing this purely Muslim perception of "gratitude" in his work and is not interested in making any changes or additions.

Conclusion

Elias defines and promotes gratitude in the very style that he clarifies at the beginning of *Daf' al-hamm*. The chapter starts with the description of gratitude, which highlights the mundane and otherworldly benefits of the virtue and continues with numerous, mostly anonymous, citations encouraging the reader to be thankful. The worldly and eschatological concern appears in both the content of the chapter on gratitude and the structure of *Daf' al-hamm*. There is little analytical or philosophical discussion of the virtue throughout the chapter. After a short description, the words of selected religious personalities are recounted. These mostly anonymous quotations are mentioned one after another without any apparent logical structure. Therefore, it is a challenge for the reader to follow the mentality of the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵ For more detail, see Atif Khalil, "The Embodiment of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Ethics," *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016), 159-178, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19585705-12341337>.

author. All of these features make *Daf^c al-hamm* a good example of *adab* literature.

As discussed in some detail, the impact of the surrounding Islamic culture is evident in both the language and the content of the text. Similar to the general style of the text, these borrowings are not systematic; they come from various sources. The author's use of the Arabic terms *shukr* and *kufr* along with other semantically connected words, such as humility and arrogance, clearly shows his awareness of Qur'ānic discourse on this matter. Moreover, ḥadīth quotations and Sufi teachings in the text suggest the author's close engagement with Islamic religious literature. When we look at the chapter on gratitude as a whole in *Daf^c al-hamm*, apart from the mention of the dialogue between monks and their students, there is hardly any explicit sign that would tell the reader that this text was penned by a Christian author. The author's extensive use of Islamic material in the text shows that Elias, as a devout Christian and a churchman, was completely comfortable using Islamic sources to compose his own ethical work for his Christian readers. This phenomenon suggests a high level of intellectual integration of both the author and his intended audience into the medieval Islamic world.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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